

Speaker Steve Gaw
Facing the Challenge of the New Millennium
Opening Address
January 5, 2000

It is with hope for our promising future, and acknowledgment of our rich history, that we face the challenges of a new century and millennium.

As we pause a moment to look back over the last 1000 years we are reminded of the amazing amount of change our world has undergone.

We have seen the notion of our world change - from flat to spherical.

Diseases which ravaged families - the black plague, polio, small pox - have been brought closer to extinction.

Our forms of communication have changed from the simple state of talking and letters to the complex methods of videoconferencing and email.

Our methods of transportation have evolved from ships with oars and sails exploring new frontiers of earth...

...to ships with rockets exploring new frontiers in the stars.

Through all of our remarkable technological advancement we have witnessed unbelievable sacrifices, courage, idealism and vision.

Time and again we have been witness to humankind's inspiring ability to rise to the challenge...

...to persevere, overcome and excel in even the most difficult situations.

As a wise and famous preacher from the south named King once said,

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

It is during these times of the greatest challenge when we have the opportunity to rise to the greatest heights possible.

Challenge and the responding human ingenuity and burning desire to succeed have given rise to some of our greatest

accomplishments.

In addition to the amazing technological advancements, America's ability to rise to the challenge has given birth to...

...noble concepts like freedom and equality...

...guiding documents such as our Declaration of Independence and Constitution...

...and the greatest nation this world has ever known.

But even as we have met the greatest of challenges when we are at our best...

...so too have we experienced humanity at its worst.

We need only look back for a moment to be reminded of the times our ability to meet the challenge has wavered.

...events such as the Holocaust...

...institutions like slavery...

...and countless wars...

...all are testimony to the fact that we as a people sometimes fall to the lowest depths just as we can ascend to the greatest heights.

Yet, as we look back on the last 1000 years, more often than not we have risen to the challenge and overcome adversity.

It is with great pride that I congratulate this body for its ability to successfully meet many of the challenges we have faced in the last few years.

Whether the challenge we faced was in bringing state government closer to the people...

...in providing Missouri families with Internet audio access so they might listen in on the debates on the House floor and the decisions that affect their lives...

...in creating a website that places a wealth of information at the fingertips of Missourians...

Or whether it was in creating a truly bipartisan ethics committee to help ensure this body is accountable to our citizens...

You have demonstrated the ability to rise to a challenge.

And just as you have improved the workings of this body, so too have you improved the conditions for Missouri's

working families.

Today we can proudly say that we live in a state where our economy is booming...

...where we have cut taxes for working families three years in a row...

...where unemployment rates are near record lows...

...where our inflation rate continues to be below the national average...

...where new and expanding businesses find opportunities to flourish...

...and where crime rates are down.

Over the last few years we have time and again risen to the challenge of helping Missouri families.

We have created legislation that ensures our state will be a better place for the generations to come...

...the Outstanding Schools Act...

...A+ Schools...

...eliminating the state sales tax on food...

...property tax relief for seniors...

...welfare reform...

...Family Development Accounts...

...ending court-ordered desegregation...

...Advantage Missouri and increased access to higher education...

...Health Insurance for Children of Working Families...

...Safe Schools Act...

...Family Care Safety Act...

...workers' comp reform...

...truth in sentencing...

Your efforts have a distinct and profound impact on the working families of this state.

Last year, this House continued the work of improving our educational system -- putting more emphasis on the basics, fully funding our school foundation formula and increasing the accountability of our schools.

We faced the challenge of cutting taxes for working families, senior citizens and small businesses...

...and we succeeded...

...marking our third year in a row of tax cuts totaling nearly \$700 million, coupled with nearly \$870 million in refund checks to Missourians.

And we undertook the challenge of preserving an important part of a way of life in Missouri - our family farms...

...reaffirming our commitment not just to the farm but to the family that lives on that farm.

In 2000, our challenges are as great and perhaps greater.

Through hard work on interim committees you have already begun the effort.

In this new century with the accelerated role of technology, education will be vital to the success of our children.

We must provide the best possible educational opportunities for their future.

Last year's "Read to be Ready" legislation increased our emphasis on the basic idea of teaching our children how to read.

Statistics on reading abilities in the early grades- 7 of 10 third graders not reading proficiently...

...coupled with stories of social promotion...

...gave us cause for action.

This year I ask you to accept the challenge of helping our young people by funding Read to be Ready so that we bring the basics back to education and accountability to the schools for the results they produce.

We should not be satisfied until the quality of our schools matches the quality of our children.

This nation stands today as the hallmark of freedom and opportunity.

It is there in great part because of the sacrifices and contributions of a group of people Tom Brokaw calls the "Greatest Generation."

With their courage, determination and sacrifice they defended not only this nation but restored freedom to much of the world...

...defeating perhaps the greatest evil of this century.

We owe them more than we can ever repay.

Let us make sure that our seniors that so desire have the opportunity to stay in their homes as long as they are able...

...and that they have safe and healthful places to live.

We must make sure that the way we treat seniors reflects the debt we owe them.

And let us crack down on those who defraud Missouri consumers, especially seniors, through telemarketing fraud and financial exploitation.

Obtaining affordable health care continues to be a substantial challenge for many of our families.

Missouri has been at the forefront of reforms in health care ...

...we are one of three states to have passed a comprehensive patients' bill of rights.

...and we have passed legislation providing better access to affordable health insurance for children of working families.

For the last two years, this House has passed legislation to ensure access to affordable health insurance for small businesses and family farmers in Missouri.

But for two years in a row, that legislation has died before reaching the governor's desk.

2000 must be the year when all hardworking families in this state finally have access to affordable health insurance.

We also have worked very hard the last few years to keep criminals off our streets...

...cracking down on meth dealers...

...toughening our sentencing laws...

...and creating the most comprehensive laws against sexual predators in the nation.

Now, amidst all the wonderful opportunities provided by new technology, we must also acknowledge the opportunities it provides for new abuses.

We must keep in mind that many of our laws were drafted before the Internet was even a dream.

In many cases, this means our citizens may not be protected from crimes committed on the Internet.

These abuses...

...the sale of alcohol to minors...

...terrifying school children with threats of violence...

...and child pornography occurring over the Internet...

...should give us cause for action.

We can change this and we must do it this year.

So too should we work to ensure that the private affairs of our citizens, such as medical and financial records, remain private.

Today, many of those records are accessible over the Internet, and in some cases for sale.

Expanding information technology should not include forfeiting our right to have private information kept private.

This session, we have the opportunity to address an issue that will impact us for generations.

The tobacco settlement could result in \$6.7 billion dollars over the next 25 years.

The possibilities exist for something which has produced sickness to produce health.

I believe we should guarantee first that any proceeds received are placed in trust and not co-mingled and lost in general revenue.

I ask that you consider dedicating some of these funds to prevent the future occurrence of illnesses through tobacco prevention, education and cessation programs...

...that a portion be invested in health care and healthy children...

...and that we also set aside some part for a rainy day.

And let what we ultimately propose be put forth to the people of this state for their approval.

This session we continue to find our family farms in crisis.

Last year's efforts to save the family farm must not cease.

This year we need to see that the markets are not closed to them.

In this time of mergers, consolidations and vertical integration, let us be sure there is still a place for the family farmer.

Today, as has been the case throughout our history, we are challenged with violence in our families.

We know of its cyclical nature and of its victims - spouses, seniors and children.

Last session we made strides in our pursuit of safer families with the passage of the Family Care Safety Act.

But during this past year we continued to hear horrific stories of the consequences of abuse in our state, including the deaths of two young children in Kansas City.

We should make every effort to provide help to families in trouble before tragedies occur.

Recently, the news has been dominated by stories about the tragic violence by and against our children.

Missouri has been at the forefront in passing Safe Schools legislation and juvenile justice reforms.

But we are not immune from the tragedies that have occurred in other states.

We should continue our efforts to ensure our schools are safe places for our children.

One hundred years ago, being able to travel safely for business and pleasure was important.

Today it is vital.

We have a transportation system which is not adequate for our needs now, let alone in the days ahead.

There have been plenty of people focusing on the past and pointing fingers at who is to blame.

Let us put these things behind us.

It is now time for us to look to the future and accept the challenge of finding solutions to address the problem.

There are those who would say this session is too difficult to be successful...

...that the challenge of an election year is too great...

...that partisanship will prevail.

Some would say we should just stay home.

But what would the consequences have been if Lewis and Clark had just stayed home?

...if Lincoln had just stayed home...

...if Neal Armstrong had just stayed home...

...if Rosa Parks had just stayed home.

...if the "Greatest Generation" this nation has ever seen had just stayed home?

We have too much to do.

We have too much at stake for the working families of this state.

We cannot afford to just stay home.

As we move into the new millennium, let us resolve to continue to work together...

...to put the welfare of the people first, ahead of partisanship and self-interest...

...building and improving on the great foundation of freedom and opportunity we have been so graciously given...

...so that our descendants are as proud of our sacrifices as we are of those who have come before us.

I believe that in the end we will succeed, not because we should, but because we must.

We have challenges to meet...

...we have work to do...

Let us get to it.